

The 2011 Guatemalan Elections – Democratic Only On The Surface

By Annie Bird, April 27, 2011

It has been twenty five years since military governments formally ceased to directly control the Guatemalan State, and fifteen years since the signing of the peace accords. But as the September 11, 2011 general elections in Guatemala near, the political panorama is grim, and to many Guatemalans the elections present limited options and are only nominally democratic.

The courageous and untiring efforts of Guatemalan communities and human rights organizations, accompanied by 22 years of intense international missions, are beginning to shed light on parallel, mafia-like networks that gained political and economic control of Guatemala during the military governments.

The parallel networks have close ties to organized crime and national and international business interests, and they hold onto power by infiltrating institutions of the State: the justice system, police, military and elected politicians through influence in political parties and manipulation of violence to terrorize the population.

This situation results in wartime levels of violence, murder rates higher than during most of the armed conflict, and gross violation of the rights of communities whose lands are sought after for mines, hydroelectric dams, biofuel development or as drug shipping corridors.

How can “free and fair” elections be held in these conditions?

LEADING CANDIDATE – FORMER GENERAL ACCUSED OF WAR CRIMES

The front running presidential candidates are Otto Perez Molina, a former general implicated in crimes against humanity, and Sandra Torres, until recently the First Lady to current president Alvaro Colom.

Other candidates include Alvaro Arzu, former president of Guatemala (1996-2000) current mayor of Guatemala City; Zury Rios, daughter of former military dictator during the infamous Guatemalan genocide Efraim Rios Montt, and Harold Caballeros, a fundamentalist evangelical pastor on his second bid for the presidency. Nobel peace prize recipient Rigoberta Menchu recently registered Winaq, a Mayan focused political party, but shows no sign of running for presidency herself; it is thought the party will focus on local candidacies.

At this point, a November 6, 2011 run-off is expected between Otto Perez Molina and Sandra Torres, which would occur if neither candidate wins over 50% of the votes in the general elections.

US EMBASSY'S CANDIDATE

Four years ago Perez Molina lost the run off with Torres' now former husband, Alvaro Colom. During the 2007 campaign, Perez Molina was generally regarded to be the US 'embassy's candidate', despite his direct participation in the Guatemalan genocide. Perez Molina is a champion of 'free' trade and big business.

US GLOSSES OVER WAR CRIMES FOR BIG BUSINESS

On April 14, 2011 the Spanish newspaper El Pais published a Wikileaks cable from current US Ambassador to Guatemala Stephan McFarland in which he shrugged off the possibility of Perez Molina's involvement in war crimes, even as he acknowledged that Perez Molina was a former head of military intelligence and commanded the army detachment that committed genocide in the Department of Quiche during the 1980's.

During the last elections, the US Embassy appeared to fear that Alvaro Colom would get in the way of US business interests by joining Venezuela's program to promote development in the Caribbean

basin through access to low priced petroleum, Petrocaribe, or by joining the Bolivarian trade alliance, ALBA.

Though throughout his presidency Colom did not make dramatic economic reforms, big business and the US embassy appear to still distrust Sandra Torres.

LEADING CANDIDATE – FORMER WIFE OF CURRENT PRESIDENT

A successful textile (maquiladora) businesswoman, since Colom's election it has been clear that Sandra Torres was the intended successor to Colom. Guatemalan law prohibits reelection or the election of a close relative of the current president. For this reason in the end of March Colom and Torres filed for divorce. Political opponents filed legal objections, and the judge who ultimately granted the divorce received death threats.

Though Torres has run a well-funded social outreach program throughout Colom's term, the couples' divorce played into intensive criticism that has been launched against the first lady since the 2007 campaigns. Further, many progressives who held out the hope that Colom, the first presidential candidate presented by the former guerrilla movement - the URNG - after it converted into a political party, would prove to be a strong reformist, have become disenchanted. The President's recent strong backing of extremely violent forced evictions in Eastern Guatemala, and concurrent statements aggressively criminalizing land rights activists disappointed many.

International reporting about organized crime in Guatemala has recently featured reports that Colom received funding from drug traffickers and that organized crime networks have gained a foothold since his election in 2008.

The focus on Colom's associates seems odd given virtual silence about the implications of Perez Molina's relationship to crime networks and war crimes; especially given that Colom has

undertaken strong efforts to combat drug trafficking, such as his appointment of a highly respected, reformist Attorney General.

SIGNS OF HOPE?

What is a sign of hope is the growing awareness among Guatemalans how organized crime networks infiltrate the state and the need for far reaching changes. But as the United States supports the military-back coup regime in neighboring Honduras, and sends clear criminals of accepting war criminals as legitimate elected officials, all while rearming the nations on a scale not seen since the US backed the bloody military governments of the 1980s, that hope dims, again.

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Rights Action Delegation: July 3 to 10, 2011 “Elections; No Democracy”

Join a Rights Action delegation to Guatemala from July 3 to 10, 2011. This pre-elections delegation will speak with human rights and social movement organizations struggling to create conditions for truly democratic processes, and limit the control organized crime and big business hold over the state through illegal networks of influence.

MEET WITH:

Human rights organizations pressing forward the ‘exemplary cases’ against war crimes; even as they meet constant setbacks;
Land rights movements of communities that support each other against the appropriation of their lands by politically influential plantation owners and organized crime bosses;
Indigenous rights movements that seek full recognition of their rights including recognition of traditional authorities and their territory;
Justice reform activists who seek to reform legal mechanisms that maintain impunity and criminalize human rights defenders; and
Communities defending their territory against transnational interests (mines, dams or biofuels) backed by political power holders.

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WHAT TO DO:

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